

Questioning
Success:
Reading
and Thinking
Together

~~~~~ *Bean Gilsdorf*

William Deresiewicz's latest book, *The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech*, is a dry-eyed look at how the internet has shifted the conditions under which artists of all kinds (writers, musicians, visual artists) are attempting to make their work and live. Deresiewicz critiques the cultural narrative that anyone can be a professional artist now that the means of production are cheap and the internet functions as the ultimate tool of distribution. In particular, Chapter 13, "The Fourth Paradigm," delves into Deresiewicz's concept that the Web has created a marketplace that is unavoidable and inescapable: "When the market is everything, everything gets sucked into the market" (p. 250). Operating in this new marketplace creates a marketplace mentality, to the extent that art becomes merely another cog in the wheels of commerce. To compete, an artist must appeal to her fans at all times; to grow and maintain an audience, her work must be consistent and recognizable, formulaic even—a brand. Success is defined entirely by the artist's ability to sell her work, so the logic of commerce prevails. Finally, Deresiewicz argues, while the earlier paradigms of "artist," "art worker," and "entrepreneur" no longer apply, the bland descriptor "producer"—a quintessential market term—now encapsulates what the erstwhile artist has become.

At a glance, this seems to be a pragmatic (if somewhat mercenary) gambit for artists, to capitulate to market logic and formulate a practice that can exist somewhat reliably within the constructs of marketplace expectations. Yet reading Deresiewicz's analysis made me feel incredibly disheartened and lonely—this isn't why I am an artist, nor do I want to define myself and my work in those terms. In fact, I have been content to have a highly independent studio practice and earn money through pursuits connected to the arts, mainly editing and writing. When executive editor Brian Gillis of the Oregon Visual Arts Ecology Project asked me to moderate a Critical Conversation on the topic of my choice, I took the opportunity to reach out to three other Oregon artists, Srijon Chowdhury, Jaleesa Johnston, and Melanie Stevens, who also operate professionally in art-adjacent roles such as instructor, administrator, writer, illustrator, and/or curator.

In our discussion of "The Fourth Paradigm," we focused on the points at which our practices differ from Deresiewicz's conceptions of a contemporary artist's life. We took issue with his implicit assumption that everyone *wants* to be an "art star," or to occupy whatever the highest-status position is. He discusses internet-fed requirements for that position—branding yourself in a niche market by producing a stable, consistent product—but he doesn't really consider the downsides, such as the artist's own boredom with creating the same thing over and over again, or the precarity of relying on an audience's taste, when trends rise and then shift rapidly away to the next big thing.

A popular question in many MFA critiques is, "Who is your audience?" That question holds different shades of meaning depending on the program, but as students we had all heard and grappled with it. Naturally, our discussion delved into the concept of the audience, what it means to have one, and whether or not "an audience" is equal to "a market." Chowdhury thought that the author's definition of the marketplace was somewhat populist, conflating a general audience with one that actually buys artworks, and perhaps the term didn't even apply to specific corners of the commercial gallery system. Stevens was disappointed that Deresiewicz doesn't acknowledge how much capitalism effectuates

violence and suffering; “to automatically subsume oneself into that particular framework,” she asserted, “is already a problem for me.” Johnston was uncomfortable with the strictures of branding, and worried about what such external pressures were doing to her students as they developed their own work.

Success, we agreed, wasn’t about having a particular number of Instagram followers or selling work for a particular price—or sometimes at all. Instead, each of us is trying to stay focused on what is meaningful to our own inquiries in the studio. I found this part of our conversation to be an antidote to the repressive structures that Deresiewicz outlines. For Stevens, success means “being able to continue to...make art that speaks to [her], and delivers the kind of narrative that [she is] interested in investigating.” Chowdhury talked about the tension between wanting to sell work and having “the work [feel] honest and fulfilling.” Johnston directly opposed the lock-step requirements of the marketplace: “For me” she said, “being free is trying to step closer to [a centered practice], even if it’s the opposite of making a living off my work. I guess when I’m saying free, I mean stepping further away from caring what anyone else thinks, or caring if someone will show this, or if someone will buy this.” The most important question for her is: “Do I feel like I lived that moment in my practice to its fullest with what I had?” That’s a powerful re-centering of devotion to an artistic discipline, which is about potential rather than product.

It is interesting to me that, among the many points raised in “The Fourth Paradigm,” we focused most on the external pressures we are trying to resist. Many visual artists *do* attempt to join the marketplace as described by Deresiewicz; some are very good at it, and reap the putative rewards. And even those who are still climbing the lower rungs of the ladder try to obtain the visible markers of “success” that seem to apply mainly to other artforms, like pop music, such as a fixed, marketable product; global travel that implies sophistication and a broad network; and hordes of followers and buzzy interactions on social media. These artists seek the trappings of marketplace success by embracing the old adage “dress for the job you want,” thus signaling that they are ready to be instrumentalized by a machine that values the product but not the producer. That’s not to cast aspersions on other people’s aspirations, but to assert that if success can only ever mean selling one’s work, then even artists consciously nonaligned with the market feel incessant pressure to conform to its forces.

It’s a shame that time did not allow our group to also read and discuss the final chapter of Deresiewicz’s book, “Don’t Mourn, Organize,” which briefly outlines some of the attempts that artists are making to circumvent this system. It is a reminder that there is no art world, only art *worlds*, overlapping circles that encompass diverse ways of operating, each according to customs and conventions defined by smaller communities with their own objectives. Overall, *The Death of the Artist* points to the need to explore important notions that our conversation only touched on, making external pressures more visible to stakeholders in the field who are also affected by their proximity to these capitalist strictures—educators, curators, gallerists, collectors, grant makers—and all those that have an interest in sustaining emancipated art practices. Further investigation at a community level might assist artists in finding ways to think critically and act collectively to reject the most paralyzing of these market-driven narratives.

# Recommended for Further Reading

Abbing, Hans. *Why Are Artists Poor?: The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008.

The “exceptional economy” here refers to cultures that assume artists are willing to work for free. The author is a sociologist, economist, and painter, and is thus uniquely poised to speak to the financial impoverishment of artists from both an academic and a personal perspective.

Buskirk, Martha. *Creative Enterprise: Contemporary Art between Museum and Marketplace*. London: Continuum Publishing, 2012.

An account of the complicated, sometimes contradictory, often problematic relationship between museums and contemporary art.

Dávila, Arlene. *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, and Politics*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2020.

While emphasizing the influence of race and class in shaping art markets, Dávila introduces the reader to work by contemporary Latinx artists through interviews with artists, gallerists, and curators.

Davis, Ben. *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013.

Contemporary art meets commerce meets class relations in chapters such as “How Political Are Aesthetic Politics?” and “Art and Inequality.” Chapter Two lays out the “9.5 Theses on Art and

Class,” a widely debated stand-alone work Davis published in pamphlet form before he wrote the book.

Deresiewicz, William. *The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2020.

The author investigates the tension between the narrative claiming that anyone with access to the internet and cheap production tools can be an artist, and the reality that most artists aren't paid for their work anymore. Of particular note is “Chapter 14: The Fourth Paradigm,” in which Deresiewicz argues that digital capitalism has flattened the distinctions among various art forms, and that the terms “artist,” “art worker,” and “entrepreneur” are no longer relevant to how artists must operate.

Graw, Isabelle. *High Price: Art between the Market and Celebrity Culture*. New York: Sternberg Press, 2009.

Graw describes the interactions among the artist-as-entrepreneur, the art market, and celebrity culture to argue that the relationship between art and the market is not truly oppositional. The book builds its thesis around the production and public/market reception of works by well-known artists such as Andy Warhol, Damien Hirst, Julian Schnabel, and Andrea Fraser.

Louden, Sharon. *The Artist as Culture Producer: Living and Sustaining a Creative Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Across forty essays written by practicing artists, the editor builds a case that artists provide a public service, both in economic value and by contributing to the culture, and thus the well-being, of their communities.

Plattner, Stuart. *High Art Down Home: An Economic Ethnography of a Local Art Market*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

This book is the culmination of 137 interviews with artists, collectors, gallerists, etc., regarding the St. Louis art scene, including their relationship to the cultural hegemony of New York. Plattner presents an informative view of the advantages and challenges for arts workers who can't/won't relocate to a major arts hub.

Relyea, Lane. *Your Everyday Art World*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2017.

Relyea uses the metaphor of the network to investigate the changes in art-world social and economic dynamics since the advent of globalization, and their political ramifications.

Shnayerson, Michael. *Boom: Mad Money, Mega Dealers, and the Rise of Contemporary Art*. New York: PublicAffairs Books, 2020.

The art market is largely unregulated, and a handful of high-powered galleries with multiple locations around the world are responsible for moving massive sums of money. This book tracks the activities of dealers like David Zwirner and Larry Gagosian to create a history of the business of art at its highest echelons.

Sholette, Gregory. *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*. New York: Pluto Press, 2011.

Most artists will never receive critical or market success, but the author argues that these workers (the “dark matter” of the book) are essential to the production and maintenance of the few who achieve high rank. Further, the collective action of the many has the potential to subvert dominant systems.

Thornton, Sarah. *Seven Days in the Art World*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.

Across seven chapters, Thornton (partner to influential gallerist Jessica Silverman) walks the reader through an art auction, an MFA critique, an art fair, a studio visit, and more. This book should be required reading for all BFA seniors.

White, Roger. *The Contemporaries: Travels in the 21st-Century Art World*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

With the advent of new technologies and through scope creep, anyone can be an artist—or maybe everything is art. The author travels through some of the lesser-known corners of the art world to discuss how contemporary art is produced and evaluated.

Zarobell, John. *Art and the Global Economy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017.

A critic, curator, and arts administrator, Zarobell analyzes twenty years of globalization and how it has transformed the way in which art is exhibited and sold.